



THE BRANT

VOLUME 3

FRIENDS OF DUNGENESS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

SUMMER 2021

State Approves Lease for Oyster Farming within Refuge

On July 27, 2021 Washington State Department of Natural Resources approved a land lease for the proposed oyster farm, within the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge. Obtaining this lease was one of the final hurdles in the approval process. Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe state in their September newsletter work will “probably begin in October.”



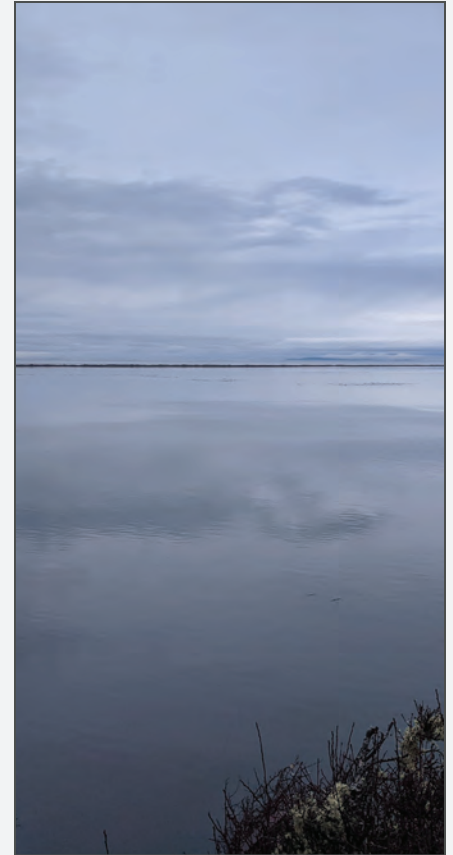
A flock of Wigeon on Dungeness Bay in early spring. How will they and other birds be impacted?

Friends have opposed the proposed location out of concern for the impact it is likely to have on Refuge wildlife. While the Tribe expects to begin farming in the next few weeks there are two issues remaining that will need to be resolved: access and monitoring.

When Clallam County gave their approval, it was contingent upon establishing a monitoring plan to evaluate the farming impacts on wildlife. A plan is currently under development, but monitoring human impact on wildlife is very complex.

Accessing the farm location will require approval. Located in an area of the Refuge that is closed to humans from October 1–May 14 means US Fish & Wildlife will need to determine if the use is compatible to permit entry to the area.

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From Marine Drive looking north to the Dungeness Spit and the proposed oyster farm location.

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Oyster Farm *Continued from page 1*

Access to the refuge by boat is seasonally prohibited to protect the vulnerable wildlife who use this refuge in winter. Disturbance, including lights, noise, human presence, boats and substrate disturbance can be anticipated from a commercial shellfish aquaculture operation, and these activities are in conflict with the purpose of the refuge.

Dungeness Bay has some of the largest eelgrass beds in the Northwest. The eelgrass and associated fauna support regionally significant populations of Brant, diving ducks, seabirds, loons, grebes, and other diving birds. This increasingly rare habitat of Dungeness Bay is especially important to Pacific Black Brant, which nests in the Arctic and uses Dungeness Bay for wintering and migration staging.

Extensive research has been performed to study Brant response to disturbance in Humboldt Bay, a similar ecosystem to Dungeness Bay with eelgrass used by wintering and migrating Brant, with a National Wildlife Refuge protecting a significant portion of the bay. High levels of disturbance to Brant were noted from clamming activity.

Routine disturbance will force individuals to move their foraging efforts to more marginal feeding areas, e.g., less healthy eelgrass beds, areas where they may be more susceptible to predation, or in regions where water depth gives less time to feed in waters shallow enough for them to feed. The mosaic of habitat is critical in Dungeness Bay.

Human activity may damage the habitat and disrupt the birds' ability to survive in the area. Phase 1 of the Dungeness Bay commercial aquaculture project proposes to use boats with hydraulic lifts, for an estimated 2–6 round trips per month (estimated at one per week), lasting up to 6 hours each. The boats will need to traverse Dungeness Bay from public dock sites to the aquaculture site. In Dungeness Bay, low tides consistent with aquaculture work occur at night in the winter, and lights will be needed both by the boats and the estimated 3–15 workers.

The proposed commercial cultivation methods include 29 acres of on-bottom oyster aquaculture in Phase 1, in addition to 5 acres of bagged oysters and beach harvest of mature oysters.

Careful scientific monitoring of the proposed 5 acre bagged oyster project would be necessary, since this method of aquaculture is new to the Dungeness Bay. Bagged oysters require human intervention to avoid sedimentation. They must be flipped routinely. This adds an element of human disturbance to the Refuge that was not seen in previous on-substrate oyster cultivation. The frequency of oyster bag flipping will depend on sedimentation rate, but with an eventual plan of 80,000 bags of oysters, this presence could be calamitous.

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CONTACTS

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Oyster Farm *Continued from page 2*

During spring migration alone, it is estimated 15,000-20,000 shorebirds use the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge. Dungeness Bay is recognized as an area of Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network site of Regional Importance by the North Pacific Coast Regional Shorebird Management Plan.

Dungeness Bay is so noteworthy that it has received the Audubon designation “Important Bird Area,” identified as being significant habitat for the conservation of bird populations. Located on the north shore of the Olympic Peninsula, this site includes intertidal and subtidal waters of Dungeness Bay, Dungeness Spit, the Dungeness River estuary, and adjacent wetlands. It comprises extensive sandflats and mudflats; some of the largest eelgrass beds in the Northwest; and a network of spits, sandbars, and small islands. Adjacent coastal wetlands contain fresh water and estuarine marshes and ponds maintained by a seasonally high-water table. Dungeness Spit and adjacent intertidal areas lie within the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge. Dungeness Bay, one of the premier estuaries in the Pacific Northwest, is used by tens of thousands of shorebirds, gulls, and waterfowl during migration and winter. Its sandflats and mudflats provide extensive feeding areas for shorebirds. Over 40 species of shorebirds have been recorded in and around Dungeness Bay, and two nest there: Killdeer, and Black Oystercatcher. Some of the most abundant migrant shorebird species — Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin, and Sanderling — also remain in Dungeness Bay through the winter. Subtidal eelgrass beds and associated fauna support significant populations of Brant, diving ducks, seabirds, loons, grebes, and other diving birds.

<https://www.audubon.org/important-bird-areas/dungeness-bay>

The proposed economic use is not beneficial to the refuge, its wildlife, and those visiting the refuge. Granting special access for a commercial operation within a closed area may have significant harmful impacts.

What can you do?

Refuge staff are currently conducting a determination of compatibility to decide if the aquaculture use is compatible with Refuge goals. Let Refuge staff know your concerns about how this commercial, economic use of our Refuge is not compatible with wildlife.

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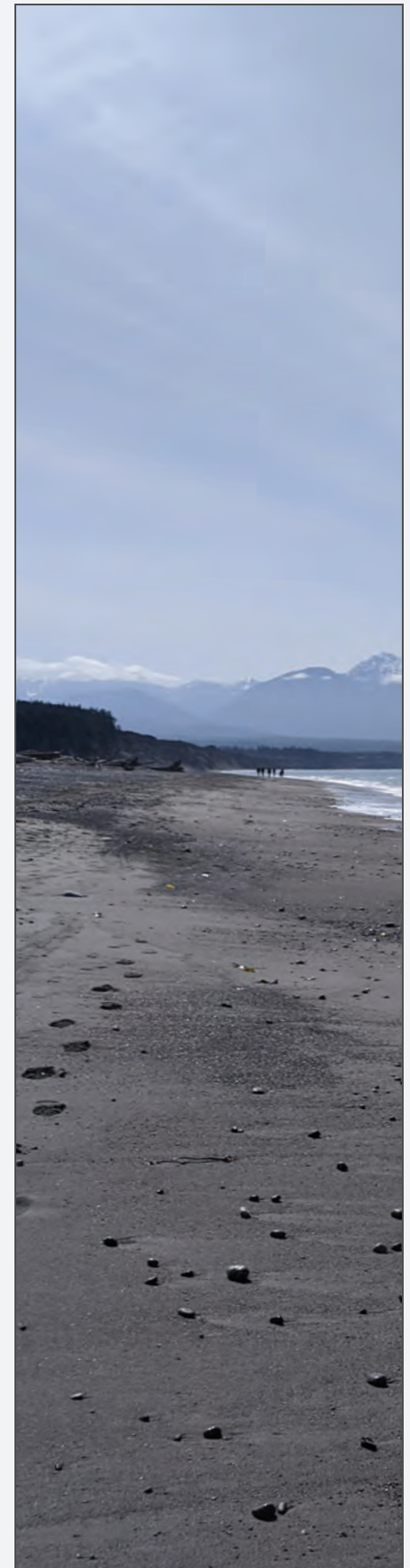
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Additional aquaculture information is available on the Friends web site:

http://www.fodnwr.org/dungeness_oyster_farm.html



Many footsteps along the Spit.

2021 Maxwell Awards

This year Friends selected two Sequim High School seniors to receive the John and Margaret Maxwell Future of Conservation Award. Irina Roybal and Rylie Hough were chosen based on the applications we received. Irina plans to attend college in California and pursue a path of environmental sustainability. Rylie plans to focus on marine science biology at college in Washington next year, with a goal to work for the National Parks System.

If you are interested in supporting the Maxwell Award for 2022 please visit: www.fodnwr.org/maxwell.html to learn more or make a donation to help us support next year's senior class graduates pursuing careers in environmental science or wildlife conservation.

Update: We're sorry to report that Rylie's plans have changed. She will not be attending college next year and has returned her award. The funds will go toward a student award next year.



Rylie Hough – 2021 John and Margaret Maxwell Future of Conservation Award Winner

Fire on Protection Island



A helicopter drops water on the fire at Protection Island. Photo S. Thomas/USFWS

On August 3, 2021 a fire on Protection Island sent smoke billowing toward Cape George. Approximately 22 acres burned before it was extinguished. It occurred within the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife managed Zella Schultz Seabird Sanctuary. No Refuge lands were impacted. A cause has not been determined and the fire is still under investigation. Anyone with information surrounding this incident is encouraged to contact Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Enforcement at 877-933-9847, via website, or through text message.



Irina Roybal – 2021 John and Margaret Maxwell Future of Conservation Award Winner

Marbled Murrelet

by Judith White

The chunky small seabird with the short, up-turned tail and small beak was changing from its distinctive black and white winter colors to the “marbled” brown breeding colors that inspired the name “Marbled Murrelet” (pronounced mer-lit). Unique to Pacific Northwest waters, this robin-sized seabird is an excellent diver and speedy flyer, clocked at up to 100 miles an hour once its small wings whirl into motion. It averages a speed of 50 miles an hour, so my chance to see the bird was best while it rested on the water’s surface before hurtling into action. I was looking out at Protection Island National Wildlife Refuge waters from Marlyn Nelson County Park in Sequim, although the bluff trail at the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge is also one of the best places to see this bird.



A Marbled Murrelet on the water. Photo R. Lowe/USFWS

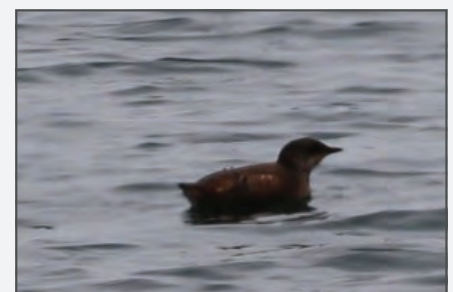
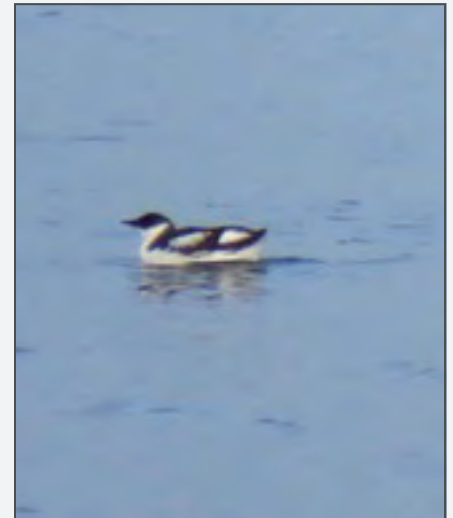
The Marbled Murrelet’s prodigious flying and diving abilities contributed to the mystery of where it nested. The story, involving many theories, 185 years of searching, and appeals to the public for help (with rewards) became feverish as it eventually remained the only bird in North America with unknown nesting behavior. This remarkable story is well documented in the excellent book *Rare Bird: Pursuing the Mystery of the Marbled Murrelet* by Maria Mudd Ruth, available in the Olympic National Park Visitor’s Center and online retailers. In 1974 the mystery was finally solved when an alert tree-trimmer, working 150 feet up removing storm-damaged limbs in Big Basin Redwoods State Park noticed an odd-looking young bird in a mossy depression. Being many miles from the sea, the chick was a surprise because it had webbed feet, and the puzzle of the Marbled Murrelet’s nesting was finally deciphered.

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Photos Judith White

Marbled Murrelet *Continued from page 5*

Intense study, including radio-tracking of adult birds carrying fish to their single waiting chick in the nest revealed that the Marbled Murrelet depends on broad (usually about a foot across) horizontal mossy branches of mature Douglas fir, western hemlock, redwood, sitka spruce and cedar. Openings in the multilayered canopy for take-off and landing are required, as well as overhead cover of another limb, to protect from predators and weather. The birds may fly up to 50 miles inland to find a suitable tree and nest site, and return to it year after year once found. One good place to hear the early morning keer-keer-keer call of the parents flying high over the fog-shrouded forest is the Heart-o-the-Hills campground in Olympic National Park. When the chick is old enough, it jumps off the nest and leaves its forest home. Uninstructed by any adult bird, it heads off in the direction of the sea, arrives and begins diving and catching fish.

The loss of much of their historic Pacific Northwest forest nesting habitat is one challenge the birds face. Dangers from oil spills, gill-net fishing and water pollution also impact their survival. Since 1992, the Marbled Murrelet has been listed under the Endangered Species Act as a threatened species in Washington, Oregon and California. In December 2019, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources issued the Long-term Conservation Strategy for the Marbled Murrelet, raising hope for the continued survival of this unique creature of forest and sea. Both the Dungeness National Wildlife Refuge and the Olympic National Park offer much-needed refuge for our beloved local “Rare Bird.”

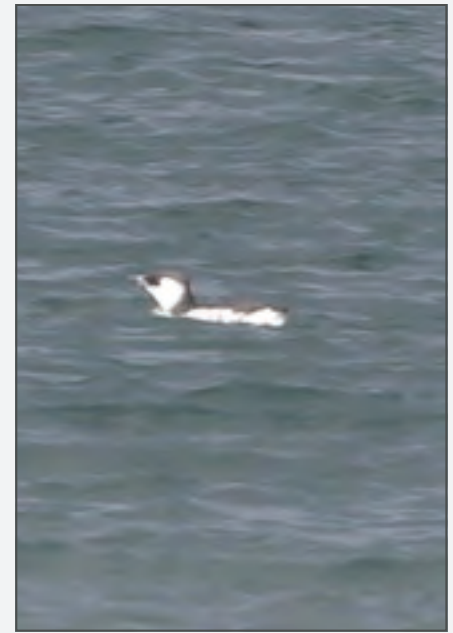


Photo Judith White



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